

SCHOOL HEALTH

Summary:

City and county health departments help keep school-age children healthy and reduce school absences by providing services like back-to-school immunizations and flu vaccine clinics. Besides keeping children (and their families) from getting sick, these services are cost-saving for schools, parents, and the parents' employers.

Local health departments also provide consultation for school nurses on individual students' health issues, and assistance with vision, hearing, and dental screenings. Local environmental public health inspectors assure that cafeteria food services prepare, serve, and store food safely to prevent food-borne illness in students and staff.

In many places where the schools can't provide nurses, local health department nurses help meet the students' needs by maintaining health records and screening children for vision, hearing, and dental problems. Local health departments provide basic nursing services, give children their prescribed medications, and make referrals to other health care providers when children have health issues such as asthma or diabetes.

Details:

For example, the City of St. Louis Department of Health provides a full range of nursing services to private schools. One student, a 15 year old freshman, has had hypertension since the second grade. His physician recently started him on a new medication and he needed closer monitoring of his blood pressure during the first three months. The health department school nurse took the student's blood pressure twice a week for 12 weeks after starting the medication, reported the numbers to the prescribing physician, and educated the student about the importance of diet and taking his medicine. As he was a very busy student, participating in sports and also a full night of homework each night, he admitted he didn't always make the best decisions. Over the 12-week period, his blood pressure consistently stayed within normal limits, and he reported better diet choices. His mother recently thanked the nurse for her efforts—her son's blood pressure remains under control and frequent monitoring is no longer needed.

The Moniteau County Health Center serves the county's nine public (K-8) and Mennonite schools. Vision screening is one important service they provide. Proper diagnosis of vision problems helps students succeed in school. The health department nurses often find children with serious vision problems, refer them to an eye doctor, and even find help with the cost of the eye exam and glasses if the family can't afford them.

Many of Osage County's 11 public and private schools lack school nurses and hearing or vision screening equipment. The Osage County Health Department (OCHD) purchased equipment to be used in all of the schools. They also provide education to students, staff, and parents on a

variety of topics including hand-washing, safety, and health department services. They partner with the United Way to administer the Dental, Eye and Shoe Program, which provides vouchers for needy school-age children to get needed shoes, dental, or vision services. OCHD recently provided tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap) vaccine (provided by the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS)) to adolescents and caregivers of young children to protect against whooping cough and other diseases. They also partnered with four schools to serve as PODs (Points of Distribution) throughout the county so that mass immunizations or medication distribution can be done from the school premises in the event of a pandemic or emergency.

Childhood obesity is a growing problem that affects children's health, social adjustment, and academic success. Two summers ago, an elementary school nurse called the Warren County Health Department (WCHD) seeking help for a 5th grade girl who was overweight and being bullied by her peers, and whose parents had limited resources. That same week, they had a call from a distraught mom whose daughter was obese. She could not afford to join a gym, her daughter was embarrassed to work out in public due to her weight, and she could not find free professional guidance on exercise and nutrition. The mother was overwhelmed and didn't know how to help her daughter, who was being bullied at school.

After these calls, the health department staff realized there was a gap in services, especially for those with limited resources and access. Over 30% of the adults and 19.5% of the children in the WIC program were obese. WCHD applied for a grant from Missouri Foundation for Health and received funding for a five-year "Ready, Set...Fit!" project. The goal is to increase physical activity and healthy eating in overweight/obese school age children, low-income adults, and employees of businesses and community organizations in Warren County. The project includes worksite wellness assistance for local businesses, so adults' knowledge and behavior changes can impact their families as well. WCHD continues to partner with school nurses, who are a trusted resource and can facilitate getting children into this great program!

The Caldwell County Health Department provides school nursing services at five rural schools, including health education programs and screenings. One of the tobacco classes presented to the elementary students had a real impact on a 3rd grade student, who was very concerned about his father. After the program he asked several questions about the harmful effects of chewing tobacco. The health department nurse encouraged him to share his concerns with his father. The child went home and told his dad how worried he was after seeing the effects of tobacco. He was afraid his dad would get sick or get cancer due to his chewing habit. The dad, seeing how worried his son was, quit chewing immediately and is tobacco free to this day.